

LOVE ... DEATH ... AND HEXES.

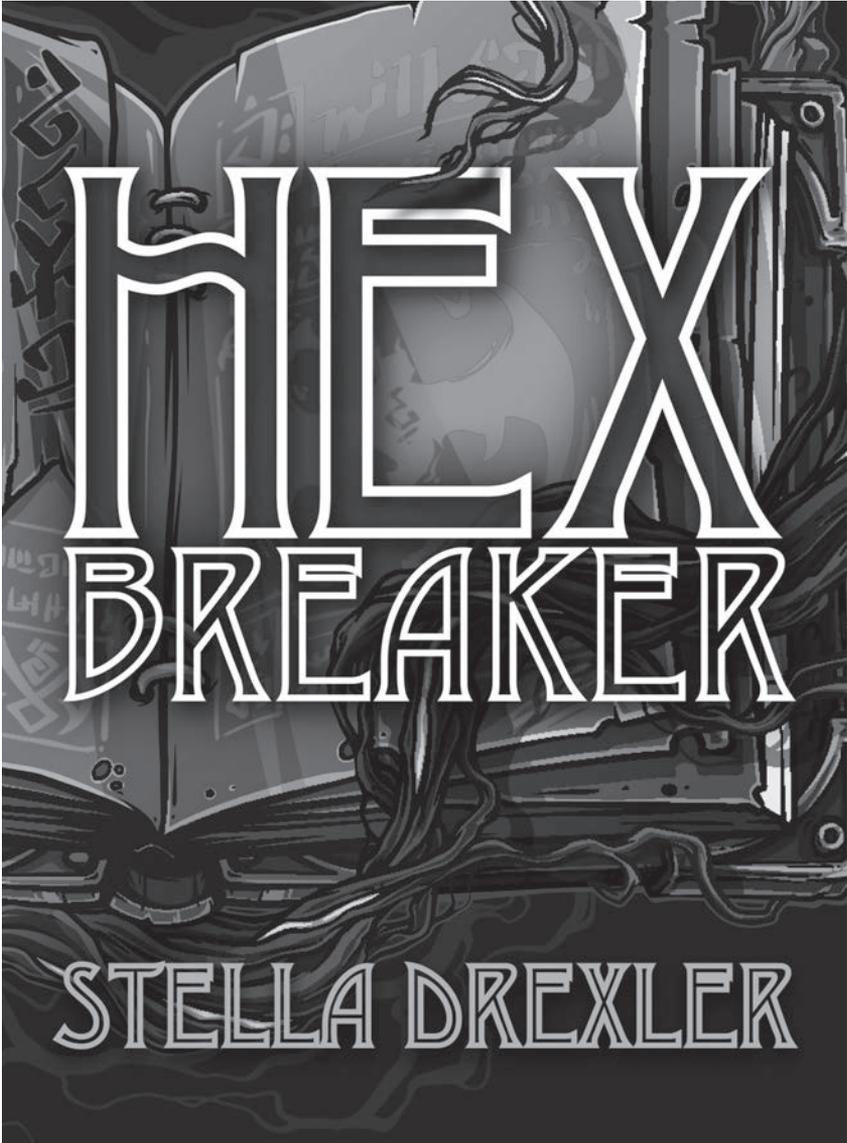


HEX BREAKER

STELLA DREXLER

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CHAPTER 1

RIO MONDRAGON ROLLED SLOWLY ALONG THE cobblestone street, past a collection of quaint clothing boutiques with mannequins dressed in expensive labels and shops pedaling the latest magical cosmetics—truly unbudgeable lipstick, anti-aging potions that really did make you look twenty years younger, and shimmery mermaid-green hair dye.

There was a bookshop advertising beginner spell books and the latest book of true prophesies. A fortune teller in a small cottage was nestled between a potion maker and a patisserie with the most beautiful cakes and pastries Alexandra Quinn had ever seen.

The street was busy this late in the morning, but Rio found a parking spot outside a magical joke shop with a large, wooden picture of an old wizard in a pointy hat painted in bright colors.

“Where the fuck are we?” Quinn demanded. “Diagon Alley? Are you sure this is the place?”

Rio shrugged. “That’s what the client said. Her ex eats at the Magic Tea Garden every morning around this time.”

“I didn’t know this place was even here.”

“I did.”

“You’ve been here?”

“Sure. The ice cream parlor has the best mood-enhancing ice cream I’ve ever had. I particularly like the *End of a Rocky Road*.”

She eyed him skeptically. “What does that do?”

He smiled.

“Makes you feel like you just won a marathon.”

“Really?”

“More or less. For about an hour or so. You should try it some time.” He winked at her. “They have a *Chill Out Mint* that might improve your attitude.”

She huffed. “It’s just a little cliché is all, okay?”

“It’s a tourist destination. You know, since that famous prophet moved here and started giving out readings for 100 dollars a pop?”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “Non-magical people are so gullible.”

“That’s a nice thing to say,” he scolded. “Those non-magical people make up most of our business.”

“Yeah, but we give them *real* magical solutions. Phoenix Ravenwood is a fraud.”

“Just because he has a stupid name doesn’t make him a fraud, Lexie. I heard he knew how every celebrity would die in the last 10 years and accurately predicted several very high-profile weddings—and affairs.”

Quinn scoffed. “And divorces, I remember, but any two-bit clairvoyant could have predicted those. I notice he doesn’t go in much for major world events. But I guess there isn’t a lot of money in that, is there?”

“You are very cynical for someone who went to a magic school and performs magic spells for a living.”

She sighed. “I’m sorry. I guess I’m a little touchy. Every fake prophet and snake-oil potion-maker makes us look bad.”

“Lexie.” Rio’s tone had turned serious, and she followed his gaze with interest. “Is that him?”

She fumbled her phone out of her pocket and opened up a text message the client had sent the previous evening with the picture of her ex-boyfriend. “Yes, looks like him.”

“Let me see.” Rio grasped her wrist to angle the phone’s screen into his view. “Yep. That’s our guy.”

They took a moment to watch Ben Wiley from behind the tinted windows as he loped casually along the cobblestone sidewalk. He was a tall man with shaggy, ash-brown hair. He was a bit skinny and wiry.

Rio scrutinized him with interest. “Looks like a hipster boyband member or something.”

Quinn laughed. “Yeah, kind of.”

“I’m much better looking, aren’t I?” Rio said, almost to himself. “Much better shape.” He pushed a hand through his mop of dark, curly hair, peering at himself in the rearview mirror. “Better hair, for sure.” He lifted up his shirt to point proudly at the flat, defined muscles of his abdomen. “Abs.”

Quinn rolled her eyes. “Put those away. Let’s go, otherwise we’ll be here all day listening to you go on about how good looking you are.”

They pushed open their car doors and stepped out onto the immaculately clean street. Ben passed under the arched trellis that led to the Magic Tea Garden—a verdant green garden, so overgrown with sweet-smelling flowers of impossible colors and sizes that it nearly obscured the glass windows lining the café.

“Kind of a weird place for a guy to have lunch every day by himself,” Quinn remarked as they entered the small dining room. Even inside, flowers climbed up the walls from the floor, nearly reaching the ceiling.

“Give him a break. He’s a romantic,” Rio said.

“Was he, though? Before he was hit with a love potion?”

“Hard to say.” He flashed a dazzling smile at a hostess with long, dark coils of hair falling around her shoulders as they reached the podium. “Well, hello,” he said warmly.

As Rio leaned down to murmur in the hostess’s ear, Quinn peered out over the tables of diners surrounded by the lush, magical flora. The place was wonderfully fragrant, slightly humid from the periodic puffs of vapor released from hidden misters on

the ceiling that kept the plants hydrated. Finally, Rio nudged her to follow him as the hostess led them through the tables to the open French patio doors leading out onto the shaded terrace.

“Will this be all right?” the hostess asked Rio sweetly, gesturing to a table in the corner a few paces away from where Ben sat alone under a tree so laden with large purple blossoms, it drooped just above his head. He didn’t seem to notice.

Rio smiled at her, and color sprang to her cheeks as she smiled back at him. “It’s perfect. Thank you very much.” He winked and brushed his fingers unsubtly against hers as she handed him the menus.

“Thanks,” Quinn added, but the hostess barely noticed her as she returned to her podium. Quinn snickered. She was used to Rio’s effect on women by now, and it always came in handy when they wanted to find a good seat at a restaurant, cut ahead in a line, or get inside information for a job.

“This is nice,” he remarked as he held a menu up to his eyes. “Oh look, they have teas for luck and money. Ooh, naughty. This one is to be more attractive to the opposite sex. I bet that tastes terrible.”

“It’s a magic tearoom, what did you expect?” Quinn picked up her menu and scanned it idly. “Do they have any regular food?” She hadn’t had time to eat breakfast on her way out the door that morning, and her stomach growled insistently. “I want the lucky burger. Do you think it actually works?”

He grinned. “Probably not. Not many herbs used in luck spells would taste good on a burger.”

“Maybe it’s just enchanted.”

He shrugged. “Maybe, but I doubt eating it will do you much good. We’d better see if the kid over there orders something, otherwise we’ll lose him if we stop to have lunch.”

Quinn eyed Ben as a waitress stopped by his table. He ordered the love tea *to bring passion into your life* and a turkey and sprout sandwich. “Ew! That sounds disgusting.”

They went for soft drinks instead of magical tea when the

waitress stopped at their table next. Quinn ordered the lucky burger with fries and hoped it would help them finish this job quickly so she could spend the rest of the day curled up on the couch. Rio ordered a club sandwich—hold the magic.

The two avoided talking about work as they ate, speaking pleasantly about the weather and current events and people they knew instead. Ben didn't glance at them during lunch. In fact, he didn't look at anyone but the waitress, and then he barely spared her a rushed smile.

He stared out at the street, watching elderly couples strolling slowly along the cobblestone walk, hand-in-hand. Apparently, it was a popular place for them at this time of day. More than half the people on the street were older.

"You know, there sure are a lot of old people here," Quinn remarked.

Rio chuckled, watching a tall, thin man shuffle past with his much shorter, rounder wife at his side. They were smiling and talking animatedly with each other, as if they never grew tired of each other's company. "It's just a few miles from a retirement community, I've been told. A very nice one on the coast with private suites and a spa. Most of these couples met there."

"How do you know?"

"I talk to people. I ask questions. And I heard some of them gossiping at the ice cream parlor. Isn't that nice?"

"What? That there's a place where rich elderly people can hook up with each other?"

He rolled his eyes. "That they can love again this late in life. A lot of them lost their spouses, but instead of mourning them forever and dying alone, they get to start over and live out their days with someone new."

Quinn considered this. "I guess. I mean, the sentiment is nice, but . . . how much can you do in your '70s and '80s?"

Rio laughed. "Based on the conversation I overheard in the ice cream place, quite a lot more than you would think."

"Rio, that's gross."

“You’re going to be old someday too, Lexie. You wouldn’t want someone to refer to you as gross.”

“I’m not talking about being old. I’m talking about you eavesdropping on some old ladies talking about their sex life.”

“Oh please, as if you wouldn’t have done the same.”

She did not dispute this. She noticed Ben hand the waitress his credit card and raised a hand to catch her as she passed. “We’d like our check too, please.”

“Time to go?” Rio asked, dabbing at the corners of his mouth with a cloth napkin.

“Looks like it.” She fished some bills out of her pocket, keeping half an eye on Ben as the waitress returned to drop off both checks a few moments later.

Ben didn’t notice them as they paid their check and followed a few paces behind him, still chatting amiably. He led them down the street, back toward the row of shops they’d passed as they’d searched for a parking spot. He passed the patisserie and the fortune teller’s cottage and ducked into the potion maker.

Quinn paused a second in front of the display of cakes and pastries in the patisserie window, but Rio caught her arm and dragged her with him to follow Ben into the potion shop.

“But—”

“Come on. We can come back and get a pastry later.”

“Fine.”

They stepped into the store as casually as they could, trying to look like a normal couple just out on a normal errand to pick up some magic potions. It was very bright, not at all like the unsavory potion-makers they often visited in the inner city. They found Ben at the counter, passing over a wad of bills to the cashier, who handed him a small parcel wrapped in brown paper.

“That was fast,” Rio muttered to her as he turned away from the counter to eye a shelf of fertility potions. He recoiled from them as if they’d burned him.

“Must be picking something up.”

Rio nudged her toward the counter. "See if you can find out what that is."

"What?" she hissed.

"Just do it."

She huffed but squared her shoulders and strode up to the counter, flashing the cashier her finest approximation of Rio's dazzling smile. She gave her long, red hair a toss over her shoulder for good measure, like she'd seen girls do on television when they flirted.

"Hi," she said.

The cashier did not look particularly impressed with this display, though his eyes did drop down to the neckline of her V-neck T-shirt for a moment before he returned his eyes to her face.

He lifted an eyebrow. "Can I help you?"

This didn't appear to be working, but she kept smiling.

"I was wondering if you could do me a favor."

He frowned, looking suspicious, but he didn't say anything. She glanced over her shoulder at Rio, who was peering out the window, looking totally cool and aloof, like a man waiting patiently for his girlfriend to finish shopping.

Of course, he did.

Fuck it. This was not working. She dropped the flirty act. "What did you just sell that man?"

The furrow in his brow deepened, and his eyes narrowed. "Why should I tell you? Are you the police?" He took another moment to eye her suspiciously. "You don't look like the police. Do you have a warrant?"

"Was what you just sold him illegal?" she asked instead of answering his questions. How did this always work for Rio?

"No. I don't sell illegal potions here."

"No? Then what was it?"

"Are you a cop?" he repeated.

"Just a concerned citizen. I'm working for his mother," she invented wildly. "She's worried about him. Afraid he's fallen in

with the wrong crowd and wants to make sure he isn't using illegal potions."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "No, you ain't. That guy's been coming in here for years. His mom passed away three years ago. I know because I sold him a coping potion."

"Oh. Erm—"

"Lexie," Rio barked from the window.

She groaned in relief. "Well, thanks anyway," she told the cashier, then muttered as she turned to Rio. "For nothing."

"He's getting into his car. Let's go," Rio told her, quiet enough that only she could hear. He grabbed her arm to hurry her out of the shop and back into the car parked down the street.

Ben's black Volvo crawled past them. He didn't even glance in their direction as Rio threw the car into gear and reversed out onto the street to follow him.

"Oh man," Quinn muttered as Ben led them away from the cobblestone street, onto a stretch of freeway. "I'm not getting that pastry, am I?"

"Not just now," Rio replied, frowning as he stomped on the gas to catch up to the Volvo.

After about thirty minutes of driving, during which Quinn expanded on her opinion about pastries and magical patisseries in general—highly recommended—Ben turned on his blinker to exit the freeway. "Geez, where is he going?" she asked.

"I have no idea. Elena didn't say anything about this."

"Oh, she's *Elena* now?" Quinn teased

He rolled his eyes. "The *client* didn't say anything about this."

They stayed several car lengths behind the Volvo. It wasn't difficult to keep up with him. Ben led them at a leisurely pace past some run-down strip malls, into an industrial district, and finally onto a barren street lined with dilapidated warehouses. They looked as though they'd been abandoned years ago by

anyone attempting to do legitimate business out of them. Quinn did not have a good feeling about this.

Finally, Ben turned off into the parking lot of one of the seedier looking buildings and parked along the side of it. Rio rolled slowly into the lot next door, keeping an eye on Ben as he strode into the yard behind the warehouse.

“Well, this looks shady as hell,” Quinn remarked.

Rio grinned. “Oh, I think it’s charming.”

“I’m sure it looks very appealing to someone who needs a place to chop up stolen cars—or bodies.”

“You are always so morbid. It’s always right to the murder with you.”

“It’s not right to the murder with me. Anyway, this is not what we signed up for, *Mondo*. We’re just supposed to find him, hold him down, and lift the stupid spell. We’re not supposed to be tracking him into some sketchy warehouse that someone has probably been dealing drugs out of since the ’80s.”

He was unmoved, even by the hated nickname from their college years. “You’re going to call me that for the rest of the day, aren’t you? It’s not *my* fault you couldn’t get a magic pastry. We go where the job goes no matter the discomfort to ourselves and others, right, *Lex*?”

She tightened her lips. She hated when he called her that, but she had started it, so she supposed she deserved it. “You’re only saying that because we’ve already cashed the check,” she muttered.

“We really needed the new sign.”

“Fine,” she grumbled as she swung the car door open to follow Ben into the warehouse. “It is a really nice sign.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

They crept around the back of the dirty concrete building, peering carefully around the corner in case Ben noticed they’d been following him. He had been oblivious since the Magic Tea Garden, though, going about his business as usual.

It wasn't his fault, really. Normal people didn't expect to be followed. It never occurred to them that the two people sitting beside them at a crowded café were plotting to pounce on them when the time was right. It made Quinn and Rio's job much easier.

The dirt yard behind the warehouse was enclosed by a barbed-wire fence, but the gate hung open; the chain that had once secured it had long since broken open and rusted straight through. They glanced at each other and stepped through. The yard was deserted, but the dented metal door nearby was propped open just far enough to see dust motes dancing in the space where the sun shone in.

Quinn listened through the crack for a few seconds, but she didn't hear a sound, not even the scrape of shoes or the scurrying of rats—of which the warehouse surely had many.

"Well?" Rio asked.

"Nothing. Let's go." She pushed the door slowly, making as little noise as she could. She had no idea where Ben was standing. For all she knew, he could have a clear line of sight to the door.

Rio poked his head inside the darkened space first. The distinct scent of abandonment and decay hung in the air.

"Ugh," he muttered under his breath as Quinn moved in beside him, taking his quiet exclamation to mean that the coast was clear.

They'd stepped into one large room littered with the remnants of a forgotten manufacturing or shipping company—rows of dusty metal shelves, stacks of boxes that had probably been chewed and inhabited by rats, and the debris of careless workers who'd long ago abandoned their posts. Sunlight filtered weakly through the dirty windows, but there was no sign of their quarry.

Quinn coughed as Rio stepped on a stack of boxes, spraying a cloud of dust into the air around them. She waved her hand.

"I don't think anyone is using this place for legitimate purposes. What do people even do in a place like this?" She

didn't wait for him to respond. "Crime, that's what. What kind of stuff is this guy into?"

"How the hell should I know?" Rio replied, brushing dust from his expensive black jacket.

"That was your job! To find out what stuff he gets into. What were you doing with the client all night?"

Rio grinned at her, and Quinn groaned.

"Well, she's very attractive. And we had a connection."

"Had?"

"Just because they're fleeting doesn't mean they aren't meaningful."

She sighed in disgust and turned back to the filthy room. "There isn't anyone here. Where the hell did he go, anyway? Did we lose sight of him? I was sure he came in here. He couldn't have gotten over that fence."

"Maybe he realized we were following him and left out the front."

She frowned. "Maybe. But I don't see how. The front door was still chained. He would have had to open it from the outside."

Rio shrugged and gestured around them. She was still annoyed, but she nodded in agreement. They separated to prowl around the room, peering around shelves and poking gingerly at boxes in case their quarry was hiding beneath them.

Quinn coughed again as the stack of boxes she'd just poked toppled down, sending another puff of dust into the air. She glared at Rio across the room.

"I really can't believe you. Every time. You can't keep it in your pants for one job?"

"Lexie . . ."

She ignored him. "You need to work on this, truly. It's got to be some kind of mental illness—"

"Lexie!"

A sound like a cannon echoed off the walls, shaking the entire building and shattering the windowpanes. Rio dove

toward Quinn in a valiant attempt to cover her as a blast of years old dust and splinters of glass rained down upon them. He was too late to shield her from being engulfed in a spray of dust and rat droppings. He stumbled back from her to avoid the mess. It really was an expensive jacket.

“God damn it!” she shouted, waving her hands wildly to dispel the cloud around her. “What the hell was that?”

“Lexie . . .”

“God, what now?”

“Lexie, run!”

Her eyes widened as the dust cleared and she saw a wall of purple and blue fire rushing toward them. She had enough time to make out the shape of a snarling dragon rearing up in the flames before Rio caught her around the waist as he ran to the exit. She felt a wave of heat hit her back as Rio shoved her out the door and slammed it behind them. She landed heavily on her knees, gasping in the fresh air. She looked up at him with a scowl.

“I guess we know what he bought at the potion shop.” Rio lifted his broad shoulders. His curly hair was a bit wild, and his handsome face was covered in soot. He looked surprisingly unruffled despite having just run for his life from a magical firebomb.

She pushed herself to her feet and pulled out her cell to phone 911.

“You are a complete ass.”



“IT’S NOT A MENTAL ILLNESS,” RIO SAID AS THEY SAT SIDE BY SIDE in the back of the ambulance. “Can I help it if I am so irresistible to women that they keep throwing themselves at me?”

Quinn glared at him. She was sure *her* hair looked like a snarled mess and that the sour whiff of sweat and smoke was coming from her. Rio, on the other hand, still looked and

smelled as perfect as always. He looked disheveled but in a good way, as if he'd just rolled out of bed—and hadn't been sleeping.

"And I suppose all of them are irresistible too?"

He placed a hand on his heart.

"I am not a strong man, Lex. And how could I refuse them? I am a lonely man. A lonely man who lives alone. Should I be denied the comfort of a women for a night or two? And should they be deprived of the pleasure of my company?"

Her glower darkened. "Our clients are not just any women. We wouldn't be in this mess if you hadn't slept with the guy's ex-girlfriend. What were you thinking? The man is under a *love spell*. Did you expect him to react rationally when he found out?"

"Well, I didn't think he'd find out!"

"He's been stalking her for two months. That's why she came to us to break the spell on him in the first place. Of course he found out!" She was cut off abruptly as a sleek, unmarked black car pulled up beside the police cruiser in the parking lot. "Oh, great," she hissed. "Now see what you've done. It's the BMA. This is why we don't mix business with pleasure."

He huffed indignantly and turned back to watch three unremarkable men in cheap suits and cheap sunglasses step out of the black car. They didn't look like special agents; they looked like exactly what they were—bureaucrats. The three men hurried inside the smoldering warehouse.

The passenger side of the black car opened, and a fourth man stepped out. Unlike his companions, he wore jeans and a sleek, blue button-up shirt that he smoothed as he straightened to his full height. Quinn sighed as he strode toward them with purpose in his gait. When he reached them, he yanked his glasses off his face to reveal dark blue eyes the exact same color as his shirt.

Jack Cole looked between them with a stern expression. Quinn ignored how the sunlight glinted off his dark blond hair,

gilding him in a very flattering golden glow. She mirrored her partner's stony expression as she gazed back at him.

"Ok," Jack said. "What happened here?" He didn't look angry, not yet, just resigned to whatever new trouble Quinn and Rio had gotten themselves into.

Rio lifted his shoulders. "Someone set off a magical firebomb."

"Yes, I can see that. Was it you?"

"Of course, it wasn't us," Quinn told him, rolling her eyes. "If it had been us, we wouldn't have done it while we were still in the building."

His mouth twitched. "Why would someone set off a magic bomb while you were in the building?"

"Maybe they didn't know we were in the building," she said.

"How should we know what motivates anyone to do anything?" Rio added.

"Ok. So, what were you doing in there? I don't expect you were looking for a new business location."

"It's not bad—" Rio began, but Jack cut him off with a stern lift of his eyebrow.

"We were looking for someone," Quinn told Jack.

"Who?"

"A job."

He sighed and crossed his arms over his chest. "Guys, I can't help you if you keep things from me."

She lifted her chin. "We don't need help from the Bureau of Magical Affairs."

"How about just from me?"

"As you can see, we made it out fine."

"The PD didn't catch the person who set off the bomb," Jack said. "He got away."

Quinn lifted her shoulders. "What does that have to do with us?"

He scowled. "Lexie, are you honestly trying to tell me someone didn't set off that bomb knowing you two were inside?"

“Why would you think that?” Rio asked with wide, innocent eyes. “Do you think people are just trying to kill us all the time?”

“Do you think I’m an idiot? I know the kind of trouble you can cause. This is not the first time you two have been in a situation like this. So, do you want to tell me who did it or not?”

Quinn and Rio exchanged a glance, then turned back to Jack.

“Not,” they replied in unison.

Jack huffed. “Fine. We’ll figure it out ourselves. The BMA has ways of tracking the residue of spells like this.”

“Well, good luck to you,” Rio said.

Jack stared at them for several minutes. They stared back at him with placid smiles. Finally, he relented, and his entire body relaxed out of the rigid loom he’d perfected over years of working as an agent of the BMA.

“You aren’t going to tell me anything, are you?”

“No,” Quinn replied.

“Your menacing stare has no effect on us, I’m afraid,” Rio added.

“Fine.” He glanced at Quinn. “Will I see you tonight?”

She smiled up at him. “Yes.”

“Ok.” He stepped forward, leaning down to plant a quick kiss on her soot-streaked mouth. “Good. See you then. You can go when the EMTs clear you.” With that, he straightened and turned away from them, striding toward the building to join the other agents inside.

Rio nudged Quinn. “See? Who’s mixing business with pleasure now?”

She scowled at him. “That is not the same. No one’s trying to kill us because of who I choose to spend time with.”

He replied with a satisfied little grin, “It was totally worth it, though.”





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THE TWO WORST KINDS OF CASES: LOVE AND DEATH.

Alexandra Quinn and Rio Mondragon run a successful magician-for-hire business, mostly handling small-time magical crimes like hexes and love potions. They operate under the watchful eye of the Bureau of Magical Affairs, who wants to pass a law requiring all magic users to wear scarlet letters, but so far, they've been able to stay under the radar since Quinn is involved with a BMA agent who turns a blind eye to their rule-breaking.

That fragile balance shatters the day Quinn and Rio's old classmate—wealthy club owner and convicted dark wizard Devin Rayne—hires them to find out who is trying to kill him. Quinn blames Rayne and his dark magic for the death of her boyfriend ten years ago, and she's not ready to let the past go.

Unfortunately, some of their former enemies have the same idea, and Quinn's resentful heart isn't helping the case either.

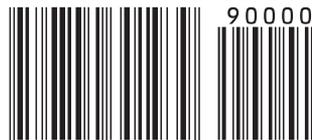


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